DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 330 UD 034 549

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TITLE	Schooled Out of Poverty. 2000 & Beyond: The Changing Face of American Schools.
INSTITUTION	Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-12-13
NOTE	16p.; Theme issue. For other issues in the series, see UD 034 545-548.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.edweek.org/srereports/special_reports_full_list.html.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Education Week; v20 n15 Dec 13 2000
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Aid; Parent Participation; *Poverty; *Public Education; Rural Areas; Rural Schools; Social Services; Socioeconomic Influences; State Aid; Working Poor
IDENTIFIERS	Family Resource and Support Programs; Kentucky Education Reform Act 1990; School Lunch Program

ABSTRACT

This issue, the fifth in a series on demographic forces shaping U.S. education, highlights the persistence of poverty, examining the experiences of one Kentucky school system. Wolfe County, Kentucky, uses education to lift its children out of poverty. This extremely poor county is as poor as it ever was (which is also true in central cities and rural communities nationwide, though the number of working poor families has grown dramatically). Wolfe County's experiences suggest that with concerted efforts, including social and academic supports, educators and communities can make inroads against poverty's ill effects and enable poor children to achieve academically. Student test scores have improved recently to the extent that Kentucky classifies all five of the county's schools as being "in rewards." Over three-quarters of the county's graduating seniors move on to postsecondary education. The financial picture for Wolfe County's schools brightened with the advent of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act, which equalized school spending statewide, established a testing and accountability system, and created family and youth resource support centers. Wolfe County also has an improved school breakfast and lunch program. It provides educationally oriented field trips to expose children to the world beyond Wolfe county. (SM)

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

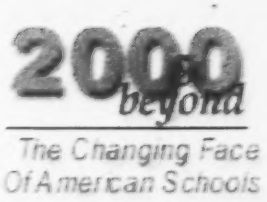
December 13, 2000

ED 458 330

Schooled Out of Poverty: Overview

Education Week

The nation is entering the 21st century riding on an unprecedented wave of prosperity. Yet, in the midst of these good times, children remain the largest single group of Americans living in poverty.



True, child-poverty rates have been decreasing since 1993. But according to the latest federal estimates, a sizable proportion of American children—16.9 percent of those 18 or younger—are poor. Moreover, the number of children living in "working poor" families grew by an estimated 30 percent during the 1990s.

The fifth and final installment of *Education Week*'s series on the demographic forces shaping education in the new century focuses on the persistence of poverty.

One school system that is dealing with stubborn poverty is Wolfe County, Ky. Standing at the northern gateway to the mountains of eastern Kentucky, Wolfe County is among the 50 poorest counties in the United States—just as it was in 1990 and probably decades earlier.

With help from Kentucky's landmark school improvement law, however, the schools there are beginning to raise students' test scores. The question now is whether enhanced academic achievement will be the county's ticket to a place in the "new economy."

Part 5 of the series includes these stories:

- **Schooled Out of Poverty**. One school system in Kentucky is counting on education to lift its children out of poverty. Includes the charts "Achievement on the Rise" and "Children in Working-Poor Families."
- **About This Series**. Read about other installments of this special series.

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

December 13, 2000

Schooled Out of Poverty

By Debra Viadero
Education Week

Campton, Ky.
Sometimes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

2000 beyond
The Changing Face Of American Schools

At least that's how it is in Wolfe County in Kentucky's eastern foothills. Since President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty in 1964, much seems to have changed in this part of the world. New highways have replaced one lane roads, providing needed access between these Appalachian mountain towns and the rest of the world. A Dairy Queen restaurant has opened up, and new sewer lines have been installed.

Along the "hollers" nestled among the hills, house trailers and newer homes have replaced some of the older, ramshackle houses. And, arguably most important, a decade long infusion of state aid has put the school system on a steady path of improvement.

"I can assure everyone that we're not bucktoothed, naked, and running around with no shoes on," says Stephen D. Butcher, the county superintendent of schools.

Nothing seemed to budge eastern Kentucky's chronic poverty. Now, with a boost from the state's reform law, residents of one rural county are pinning their hopes on the schools.

What hasn't changed, however, is the extent of poverty here. With 40 percent of its residents living below the federal poverty line, Wolfe County, like its sister jurisdictions throughout eastern Kentucky, is among the 50 poorest counties in the United States today. It is, indeed, almost as poor as it ever was.

The same can be said for pockets of central cities and rural communities throughout much of the United States. Even though U.S. Census Bureau figures show that the nation's poverty rate is at its lowest level in 20 years, the fact is that in the midst of unprecedented economic prosperity, poverty has not disappeared. According to the latest Census Bureau count, 11.8 percent of all Americans were officially poor last year. That means their families' annual incomes fell below the federal poverty level, which was $17,029 for a family of four.

That percentage is about the same as it was in 1979.

At the same time, the number of "working poor" families—those whose incomes remain below the poverty level even though at least one parent works full time—has grown dramatically. By one estimate, the number of children living in such families rose 30 percent in the 1990s, to 5.8 million now.

Even a mild downturn in the nation's economy could push the overall poverty numbers back up again as easily as a breeze carrying a feather.

"If we've had such large numbers of poor families and working-poor families in a period of

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probably the longest economic wellbeing in our history, I think it's pretty clear that this whole group will undoubtedly increase if we have any kind of economic recession or a slowdown," says Ruby Takanishi, the president of the Foundation for Child Development, a New York City-based philanthropy.

More to the point for educators is a stark demographic reality: Children constitute the largest single group of Americans living in poverty, an estimated 12.1 million nationwide, or 16.9 percent of all those age 18 or younger. The comparable figure in 1979 was 16 percent.

In Wolfe County, more than 1,000 children are classified as poor. The stubborn persistence of child poverty confronts schools here, as elsewhere, with old challenges even as millions of Americans begin the 21st century buoyed by the promise of the "new economy."

But Wolfe County's experience also suggests that with concerted efforts, including social as well as academic supports, educators and their communities can make inroads against poverty's ill effects and enable poor children to achieve academically.

"Some children live in poverty for a short time while others spend a significant portion of their childhood in poverty. The number of years in poverty is significantly associated with negative outcomes for children."

—Excerpt from *Consequences of Growing Up Poor* , a 1997 book by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg J. Duncan, and Nancy Maritato

A banner hanging across the courthouse here in the county seat of Campton reads, "Education Pays." Signs with similar messages sprout like wildflowers on roadsides, in school hallways throughout the county, and in front yards.

They are proof that people here are counting on the school system to do what the War on Poverty programs, welfare, and the coal boom of the 1970s have been unable to do so far: rescue them from chronic poverty.

"Our roads helped us more than anything to be able to get in and out of east Kentucky, but our education has lagged behind," Butcher explains. "For east Kentucky to continue to prosper and become a viable part of the U.S., we must improve our schools."

Research suggests that such optimism may not be misplaced. Studies show that a student's lifetime earnings increase for every additional year of schooling attained beyond high school. And the income gap between a high school dropout and a student with some college experience has widened over the past two decades.

The 7,400 residents of this county have good reason to be proud of their schools, too. During the past 10 years, the 1,300student district built its first new school since 1962, according to Butcher. Student test scores have improved over the past three years to the extent that the state classifies all five county schools as being "in rewards." Under Kentucky's school accountability system, that designation means schools have shown greater-than-projected improvements in test scores as well as dropout, retention, and attendance rates. Of Kentucky's 176 counties, only nine others qualified for the same label this year. For their efforts, each of the county's schools will share in a $10 million pot with other schools "in rewards."

In fact, last February's math scores on state tests for Rogers Elementary School put the county school among the top 6 percent in the state.

The district also sends more than three-fourths of its graduating seniors on to vocational schools, community colleges, or four-year institutions. Buoyed by generous scholarships, the largest percentage of them head off to one of the seven colleges and universities lying within 70 miles of the area.

But, in a district where 90 percent of students come from families poor enough to qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, educational success has not come easy.

If anyone knows what it has taken, it is Stephen Butcher. Born just three miles from the

Butcher Holler that Loretta Lynn immortalized in the song "Coal Miner's Daughter," he is a lifelong resident of eastern Kentucky. The son of a coal miner himself, the superintendent remembers as an 11 year-old boy touching President Johnson on the shoulder when he toured the area in the 1960s to promote his poverty programs.

For most of these eastern Kentucky counties, poverty hit hard in recent decades when the coal mines were exhausted in the 1970s and 1980s. Wolfe County, on the other hand, never had much coal from the start. Outside of the school system, an occasional factory, a small coal-processing plant, and a regional post office, employers and the jobs of any kind they offer have long been scarce here. At 10.9 percent, the county's October unemployment rate was more than 2* times the state average. The high rate is due in part to a recent plant closing.

Wolfe County, Ky.

- **Population:** 7,400
- **Percentage of population that is poor:** 38
- **Public school enrollment:** 1,300
- **Student profile:** 99 percent non-Hispanic white. The current minority student population is made up of seven African-Americans and two American Indians.
- **Percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price meals:** 90

Until the 1996 overhaul of the federal welfare system, which limited the amount of time that welfare recipients could remain in the program, living on public assistance had become a way of life for a handful of habitually unemployed families here.

Sister Margie Zureick, a Roman Catholic missionary who has worked in the county for 13 years, remembers tutoring a high school student and asking him what he wanted to do with his life.

"He said, 'I'm going to draw,' " she recalls.

"Oh, you mean you're going to be an artist?" she asked him.

"No," he replied, "I'm going to draw the welfare."

Compounding the area's economic hardships is Daniel Boone National Forest, which covers much of the county. While the 640,000 acres of rugged timberland are a potential tourist draw, they leave all the counties they touch with little in the way of a tax base to pay for schools.

As a consequence of all the economic constraints, by the late '80s, school systems in the eastern and westernmost parts of the state were spending as little as $2,000 to $3,000 a year on average to educate a child, while the state's wealthiest districts were spending as much as $9,000, according to state school officials.

Longtime teachers recall starting their careers here with little more than chalk and a chalkboard for classroom supplies.

"When I first started teaching in the 1960s, I was in a one-room schoolhouse, and you had to be principal, cook, teacher, everything," Emma Jean Beasley, a 29year teaching veteran, remembers. "You had a bucket and a dipper, and you had to get your water from a well. We are wonderfully blessed now."

The financial picture for Wolfe County schools brightened in 1990 with the advent of the

Kentucky Education Reform Act. The landmark legislation, born of an education finance lawsuit brought by poor counties, required the state to take steps to equalize school spending. As a result, state dollars began pouring into Wolfe County schools as well as into those of its eastern Kentucky neighbors.

Nationwide, an estimated 12.1 million children are living in poverty.

Now, the $4,686 in state aid that the county receives per student is the highest such payment in the state. Some of that money is provided because of the county's costly school transportation. Wolfe County school buses log 45,000 miles—about 6,000 of them on unpaved roads—each month. But most of the state assistance reflects the high number of pupils deemed "at risk" under the state funding formula. The school improvement legislation also prohibited the nepotism that once ran rampant in districts throughout these mountains. With school systems serving as the primary employer in most counties, superintendents and school boards once wielded enormous political influence, and not all of it was used to benefit children. Instead, some school officials used their power to pad the payrolls with relatives and anyone else who managed to make it into their good graces—whether qualified or not.

The new law also set up a testing and accountability system to force schools to focus on improving student achievement. In what is probably the most debated part of the legislation, the measure set up a carrot-and-stick approach that combined cash rewards and the threat of outside intervention to prod schools to do better. And, even though research has long showed that students from low-income families tend to have poorer academic achievement than those from more affluent homes, the accountability formula did not allow schools to use poverty as an excuse for failing to raise test scores.

"My kids in Wolfe County, with 90 percent on free and reduced lunch, are supposed to do as well as kids in Anchorage, Kentucky, where there are zero percent of kids on free and reduced lunch," Butcher points out.

Another salient feature of the law for poor communities was the creation of family-resource centers and youth-service centers in or near schools with high concentrations of poor children. The centers were intended to level the playing field for students within their own school systems by providing families with eyeglasses, shoes, warm coats, help with a fuel bill, or almost anything else to help poor children benefit from their schooling.

Looking to leverage their newfound resources, district administrators in Wolfe County set out to shrink class sizes to an average of 14 students, to beef up reading programs in early elementary school, and to add after-school tutoring. Butcher rehired Beasley and 10 other retired "master" teachers and administrators on 100 day contracts. The veteran educators are now deployed in all five county schools, where they work as reading specialists, guidance counselors, principals, and art and music teachers. Now, for the first time in the system's history, every school has a guidance counselor as well as the services of an arts teacher.

In almost every case, the school board went along with the improvements, usually voting 50.

"If it could've been fixed by throwing money at it, we did that," says Roger Drake, an accountant and the board's juniormost member. "I think the success we've had is the result of having more resources now and perhaps having better strategies than we've had in the past."

Perhaps most important of all, teachers and administrators, at least outwardly, bought in to one of the school improvement act's central tenets: the conviction that all children, rich and poor alike, can learn.

"We are no longer satisfied saying your mom and dad didn't amount to much, and you won't either," says Assistant Superintendent Deatrah Barnett. "We teach our kids that being from eastern Kentucky doesn't mean you're dumb."

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"When a child's body is confronted with a 'fuel shortage,' a natural rationing system kicks in. Scarce food energy goes first to survival (maintaining critical organ function), and then to physical growth. Social activity and cognitive development are lower priorities. That is why undernourished children often have low energy levels and appear to lose interest in the activities and people around them. This in turn affects their social interactions, their curiosity, and their overall intellectual functioning.

—Excerpt from "Our Basic Dream," a report on working families and children published this year by the Foundation for Child Development

The yellow school buses begin rolling up the hill to Campton Elementary School by 6:30 every weekday morning. They arrive early because the district, like many others in poverty-stricken areas, provides free breakfasts and lunches.

Nationwide, 96,000 public and private schools take part in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program, and 72,000 schools provide federally subsidized breakfasts. Wolfe County kicks in the extra $10,000 to $14,000 a year required to offer both meals to children of all income levels.

The universal meals program, offered at all schools here, is a big improvement over the district's past experiences with the federal program. In the past, students were given tickets to be punched at the lunch line—one color for students who had paid for their lunches and another for those getting a free meal. Students could always tell which classmates didn't have to pay.

"When I was in elementary school, I would beg every year not to complete the application for free lunch," says the school board's Drake. "One year, it got so bad that they would call the roll, and if you paid for your lunch, you said, 'Here,' and if you got a free lunch, you had to say, 'Free.' When every child goes in and eats free, that evens the playing field."

It's hard to know how many children here are actually coming to school hungry. "Mountain people," as eastern Kentucky residents like to call themselves, absorb their own homeless relatives, stretching their food supplies among poorer relations. But state figures show that 955 families in Wolfe County collect food stamps. And teachers can't help but notice that some children show up on Monday mornings with voracious appetites that decrease as the week wears on.

Taking part in the universal meals program is one of the extra steps the district has had to take to ensure that all students come to school ready and able to learn.

"We think that's one of the most important things we've done as a school system," Butcher says.

But it's also just a first step.

To surmount some of the other barriers that come between a child and learning, the Wolfe County schools have Susan Lacy. She is one of five family-resource center and youth-service center workers who have begun serving the schools here since the advent of the school improvement act. Under the law, the cen ters receive $204 for every schoo-lage child eligible for a free lunch.

Wolfe County has one youth-service center serving the middle and high schools, and two family-resource centers—one at Red River Elementary School, and another for Rogers and Campton elementary schools. Lacy, working out of a closet-sized office at Rogers, shuttles between the two K5 schools.

When KERA first passed, critics predicted that centers like these would not last. They feared

communities would view them as an unwelcome intrusion on their privacy, rather than the helping hand they were meant to be. But the centers defied the predictions to become one of the least controversial parts of the state's school improvement movement.

Key to their success, the centers are permitted to serve all students, rather than only those who are poor. That eliminates the possible stigma associated with walking through Lacy's door.

A native of Taylor Mill, Ky., a more urbanized area outside Cincinnati, Lacy also benefits from the fact that her husband's family name is well known in these parts. Both factors combine to ensure that she has no shortage of clients.

"You never really know what you're going to be doing every day," Lacy says. She has, for example, filled out guardianship papers for parents; bought shoes for students; organized a "Readifest" in the summer to hand out school supplies and study tips to children; put together luncheons on parenting education; traveled down rutted, unpaved roads to reach families with no telephone; and organized vision, dental, and hearing screenings for children.

'We are no longer satisfied saying your mom and dad didn't amount to much, and you won't either. We teach our kids that being from eastern Kentucky doesn't mean you're dumb.'

Deatrah Barnett, Assistant Superintendent, Wolfe County School District

"We have very few healthcare services in the county," Lacy points out. The medical practitioners include a sole pediatrician, a single general practitioner, a part-time dentist, and the local mental-health agency. To reach a hospital or more specialized medical services, parents must take their children outside the county.

But, without a working car or gas money, getting to any doctor is a big barrier for some.

"We do have a taxi, but you can't hardly afford to send a taxi to Lexington," about 60 miles away, Lacy says. And a medical transportation van run by the local development district is timeconsuming and awkward to use for families with small children.

The family-resource centers in Wolfe County also established a day care facility in a trailer behind Campton Elementary School, where working parents can drop their toddlers off for a fee of $10 a day.

"Things are on the way up for me now, and I can tell you that's thanks to Susan," says April Broughton, a young mother with three children enrolled in Rogers Elementary School.

April and Danny Broughton have been struggling to make ends meet since starting out life together nine years ago as teenage parents. But a series of health crises this fall dealt them near-crippling blows.

The Broughton family lives in a tiny, rented house with low ceilings and a broken window. Outside, a worn plaid couch and a battered Pontiac blight the front entrance. But inside, the house is spotless, the panel-board walls covered with smiling pictures of the Broughton children.

The family's health problems began when 7yearold Danny Jr. nearly died from an allergic

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'When you open the door to [a] school, you open the door to your child's future.'
April Broughton, Parent, Wolfe County

reaction to a bee sting he received on the school playground. The close call prompted school officials to ask April Broughton to obtain a couple of extra automatic syringes of epinephrine so that teachers and school bus drivers could have the lifesaving hormone injections handy in case Danny needed them to ward off another allergy attack. But the family's insurance would not cover the extra doses.

Paying for health care is a problem common to poor and working poor families. More than 11 million children in the United States are without health insurance. And statistics show that only about 68 percent of children in families living in official poverty were in very good or excellent health, compared with 86 percent of children in families living above the poverty line, according to a report published this year by the Foundation for Child Development.

The problem was solved for the Broughtons when the Family-resource center, working with Sister Zureick's local Catholic services agency, paid for the extra epinephrine.

The family's difficulties continued, though, when April Broughton suffered two, successive heart attacks weeks later. The young mother underwent surgery to correct the defect causing her heart problems. At about the same time, her husband suffered a severe ankle injury that has kept him from his factory job for months.

"Susan helped with food, rent, clothing needs, blankets, cleaning stuff, and just with someone to talk to," April Broughton says.

The support enabled the family to avoid having to move so that Danny Jr., Miranda, and Kristen could continue to attend Rogers Elementary in the midst of the crises confronting their family. April Broughton credits the resource center, along with the nurturing atmosphere at the school, with helping keep her children engaged in school during a difficult time.

"I think when a child feels safer, they try harder," she says. "When you open the door to that school, you open the door to your child's future."

Zureick says the family-resource centers have filled some holes in the county's social service network. "When people get a cutoff notice now, and their children are in school, the resource center is there, and they're on that with those children," she says. "Also, they can do things like provide little lessons on taking care of teeth. We could always give out toothbrushes and toothpaste, but without any education along with it."

The nun works out of the back of a tiny, white Catholic church in Campton. She's the keeper of the local food pantry and a longtime missionary in this neck of the woods. From her perspective, poverty has become less visible over the past 22 years but just as hard—if not harder—for families to deal with.

Two decades ago, she says, "poor people's food," such as cornmeal, coffee, and lard, was cheap and easy to come by in these mountains. A family could buy a car for $50 and fix it themselves. But such staple items are now as expensive as anything else in the grocery story, and auto repairs require sophisticated computer equipment that is unavailable to most do-it-your-selfers.

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"By the time my students reach me as ninth graders, a large percentage of them have given up on ever rising above the inferiority complex so strongly embedded in the world around them. They rationalize that they won't need an education, because their parents didn't, and their parents before them did not either. I combat this flawed thinking on a daily basis. I hold up my story as motivation for them."

—From "My Odyssey: Setting Sail for Ithaca," a paper by Kevin Jones, a Wolfe County High School teacher

Zureick and other advocates for the poor also contend that the welfare overhaul launched across the country by the 1996 federal law has had little impact in these parts. She recounts a case in point: a young mother whose $39 a month rent jumped to $100 as soon as she landed a 30hour a week job at a convenience store.

Under a directive issued last spring, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development said those leaving the welfare rolls should be protected from such rent hikes for at least a year after they go to work. But officials of the Kentucky Cabinet for Children and Families say they, too, have heard that some local offices of the federal agency have yet to get the word.

"The system is set so you can't get ahead," Zureick argues.

Nationwide, advocates for children voice similar concerns. In some states, families also lose their childcare benefits when welfare mothers return to work. (Kentucky's childcare benefits diminish the longer a mother works, but families that fall within the state's income guidelines are still eligible for assistance.) The problem is that childcare costs on average eat up 30 percent of a family's budget, making it difficult for many minimum-wage-earning families to cope.

"Taking a minimum-wage job, even if you're working full time, isn't going to get you out of poverty if you have two or three kids," says Richard F. Wertheimer, the area director for data and measurement for Child Trends, a Washington research and advocacy group. "With two parents working, minimum wage jobs will get you out of poverty."

Many experts, in fact, attribute the dramatic increase in working-poor families to the changes in the welfare rules.

That's why kera and the improvements it has helped generate in Wolfe County schools have made more of an impact on children's lives here than the welfare-to-work movement has up to now, says Zureick. Similar school programs in other states, such as Georgia's universal pre-kindergarten programs, are also making a dent, according to advocates and experts.

"Children have to see that there are things they can do in life," Zureick says, and school may be where they get that first glimpse.

Like many living in isolated poverty, whether in a mountain community or a central city, people here have been told for so long that they are backward they often come to believe it. Overcoming that psychological hurdle, Wolfe County educators say, may be even harder than addressing the physical hurdles that keep children from making the most of schooling.

For that reason, the schools have worked hard at creating a culture that welcomes children and their families, values them, and widens their horizons.

"I get here at 6:15 every morning so that I can make sure that the first thing that children see when they get off the bus is my face," says Howard K. Osborne, the principal of Campton Elementary School. Wearing a Winnie-the-Pooh tie that clashes with his plaid shirt, Osborne does indeed cut a cheerful figure in his school. To greet all of Campton's 256 students with a smile, he travels more than an hour each morning from his home east of here in Johnson County. "That may be minor to some folks, but for me, it sets the tone for the day," he says of his role as official greeter.

When students arrive late, Osborne is there, too—to praise them for coming.

Much about the 67yearold building that Osborne oversees is as welcoming as he tries to be. The white walls are trimmed in a bright sky blue. The aging floorboards gleam. And examples of children's work crowd the walls, along with explanations of how the work aligns with the state's curriculum frameworks.

With 95 percent of Campton Elementary's children eligible for the federal subsidized-lunch program, this is the poorest of the county's three elementary schools. The high number of impoverished children is largely due to the presence of three public housing projects nearby, the county's only such facilities.

'There's not much for these children at home. If we can't get [them] the help they need, they just sit in the back of the room and wither.'
Cristel Evans,
Teacher,
Wolfe County

"There's not very much for these children at home, and most don't even have two parents at home," says Cristel Evans, who teaches a combined 4th and 5th grade class at Campton. "If we can't get students the help they need, they just sit in the back of the room and wither."

Even so, the school last year managed to improve significantly its standing on the California Test of Basic Skills, a national standardized test, by 34 percentile points, jumping from the 25th to the 59th percentile.

Elementary schools in Wolfe County also organize basketball leagues. On the other side of the county, Red River Elementary School has even opened its "outdoor classroom," a park-like setting in the school's backyard, to weddings and other community events.

Schools are opening their doors in part to draw in parents and engage them in their children's schooling. Educators here say they are constantly battling the ingrained idea that education is their job alone. As a result of that notion, children start kindergarten with a wide range of skills. Parents have already taught some of their 5yearolds to recognize letters and numbers; other youngsters barely talk or have never come in contact with a book.

Adult literacy rates may explain some of the reluctance on some parents' parts to be more involved in schooling. Countywide, state officials say, 53.2 percent of working-age adults read and write only well enough to read a medicine bottle or decipher a bus schedule. Nationwide, the figure is estimated to be about 40 percent. Wolfe County's number suggests that a sizable proportion of parents may be uncomfortable walking into their children's schools, an environment where they once experienced some failure themselves.

Nonetheless, an estimated 150 to 175 parents turned out for parent conferences at Campton Elementary this fall. Parents and educators at Campton and the district's other elementary schools say such numbers have been growing each year since the mid 1990s.

To make the world beyond Wolfe County less intimidating and more accessible, the school system has also sunk considerable resources into educationally oriented field trips.

Evans' 5th graders at Campton, for example, may take as many as six trips this school year. Destinations last year included an aquarium, a state history museum, a car manufacturer, and a natural rock formation just a few miles away.

"Last year, one-third of our children had never been there," says Evans, referring to Natural Bridge State Park, barely a 10minute drive away. Most of the trips also include a stop at a restaurant to give students practice at buying their own meals—a rare experience for youngsters in a county with very few places to eat out.

Typical of many of the district's teachers, Evans is a product of the school system herself. At the county's only high school, for example, 32 of the 35 teachers are former students.

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One such success story was Kevin Jones, the valedictorian of the class of 1994 at Wolfe County High School. The youngest of six children, Jones was the first person in his family to go to college. He won a full scholarship to Morehead State University, about 70 miles from home, where he graduated summa cum laude.

His family back in Wolfe County thought their boy was headed for bigger and better things, but all Jones wanted to do was come back and teach English at his alma mater.

"I'm here because I can be anywhere," he says. "There's just this embedded idea of inferiority that some of these people have, and I just wanted to prove them wrong."

'I'm here because I can be anywhere. There's this embedded idea of inferiority that some of these people have, and I just wanted to prove them wrong.'

Kevin Jones,
Teacher,
Wolfe County

In the classroom, he tells his own story, holds high expectations for his students, and tries to motivate them to achieve.

"I think the quality of education they get here will allow them to compete wherever they go," Jones says of his students. "But it's an everyday battle."

The desire to come back home is typical here. While small towns all over the United States are drying up, Wolfe County's population has remained more or less stable since 1990. The natural beauty of the mountains, family ties, and the prospect of living a life relatively free from the threat of crime are all big draws for these former students.

"I did some business in Dayton, Ohio, and I was instructed that if I got a flat tire outside of the plant gate, don't get out of the car. Those are the folks who should move," says the school board's Drake, another Wolfe County native who returned home after college.

But the school system can only hire so many of its returning "best and brightest." Without an economic base to provide more jobs, the rest may one day end up leaving and taking their brainpower and salary potential with them.

"To educate people and have them end up leaving, that's a scary thing," says Gordon Parido, the principal of the high school.

Parido, a transplant from Clarke County, Ky., is doing his part to sow the seeds of entrepreneurship. Under his watch, the number of students taking courses in nearby vocational technical programs has grown from 12 to 65 over three years. One hope is that those students will be able to put their newfound skills to work in the community.

School leaders also worry they may not be able to maintain the level of resources that has brought them this far. (The district is just past the halfway point toward hitting its target goal on the state's school accountability index, which means there is still plenty of room for improvement. Under the school reform law, states have until 2014 to reach their targets.) School officials know that superintendents come and go, political leadership changes hands, and money sometimes runs out.

"You're looking at a cycle that's going to take 20 or 25 years to break, but are we going to be able to sustain this for 20 years?" Parido asks. "We can't put our feet up and say, 'Man, we've done a real good job,' because it's going to get away from us again. Long after I've retired, we may see the results of what we're doing now."

Larger social problems also threaten the educational progress the county has made. Like any area with high levels of poverty, Wolfe County has its share of abused children, depressed parents, incarcerated parents, and pregnant teenagers. Each year between 1996 and 1998, according to Kentucky Kids Count, an annual compilation of children's wellbeing indicators, an average of 27 babies were born in the county to teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19,

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most of them unmarried. That rate was the second highest in the state.

"Some things have not changed," Jones, the high school teacher, noted in a college paper on his own literacy development. "I see those same girls writing letters to their star-crossed lovers, praying for marriage at 15 to show that they are mature women."

If premature parenthood prevents mothers from furthering their education, as statistics show is often the case, the cycle starts anew with the next generation.

'It's tough for me to convince some kids that getting high is not a good thing when, for some of them, that's probably the best they've felt all day.'
Gordon Parido, Principal, Wolfe County

And despite the bucolic setting, drug use is as prevalent among Wolfe County's children as it is anywhere else. Surveys show that marijuana, alcohol, and inhalant use is on the rise among the county's high school students. At the elementary level, a startling 13 percent of students reported having used inhalants, most often gasoline fumes. And, suggestive of the uphill nature of this battle for the county, 16 percent of high school students said their parents don't believe it's wrong for their children to drink alcohol. Eleven percent of the same group said the same thing about marijuana use.

"It's tough for me to convince some kids that getting high is not a good thing when, for some of them, that's probably the best they've felt all day," Parido says.

All those reasons lead educators here to stress that the job of tackling child-poverty is bigger than schools can handle alone. It's a refrain that is echoed by advocates at the national level as well as educators in the countless communities nationwide that continue to be challenged by childhood-poverty rates that just won't go away.

"Schools are an important part of the answer, but they're not the only answer," Takanishi of the Foundation for Child Development says. Employers, parents, adult education programs, and social-service agencies all have to play a part, too, she says.

In Wolfe County, though, schools may yet turn out to be the best place to start.

On the Web

The National Center for Child Poverty publishes "Child Poverty in the States: Levels and Trends from 1979 to 1998." Includes state fact sheets. (The fact sheets require Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

"Did you know? Child Poverty Is Increasing," August 2000, an opinion piece from TomPaine.com, comments that "both Vice President Gore and Governor Bush have identified education as a top priority in their administrations but they conveniently overlook the relationship between poverty and educational test scores."

"Stressful Family Lives: Child and Parent Well-Being," from the Urban Institute, finds that "Children who have stressful family lives"—in part defined by chronic financial difficulties—"are twice as likely to exhibit low school engagement as other children."

The Heritage Foundation has published *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High Poverty Schools* . (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.) Also, get general information about the foundation's No Excuses campaign—a national effort "to mobilize public pressure on behalf of better education for the poor."

PHOTOS: Danny Broughton Jr., 7, rides his bike in rural Wolfe County, Ky., where more than one-third of the population still lives in poverty.
A native of eastern Kentucky, Stephen D. Butcher took over as superintendent of the Wolfe County district three years ago. "For east Kentucky to continue to prosper and become a viable part of the U.S.," he says, "we must improve our schools."
Teacher Kevin Jones helps junior Brittany Oliver with a Spanish lesson at Wolfe County High School, where he was the valedictorian of the class of 1994. The school system is one of the few employers for former students who return

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home after attaining a higher education.

A system of social and financial supports that the Kentucky school reform law requires of school districts helped April and Danny Broughton and their three children, from left, Kristen, Danny Jr., and Miranda, weather several health and monetary crises this year.

Sister Margie Zureick, right, a Roman Catholic missionary, and social worker Elsie Perkins, load food from the local food pantry at Good Shepherd Catholic Church to give to poor families in Wolfe County.

—All photos by Stewart Bowman

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Vol. 20, number 15, page 1,34-41

Education Week

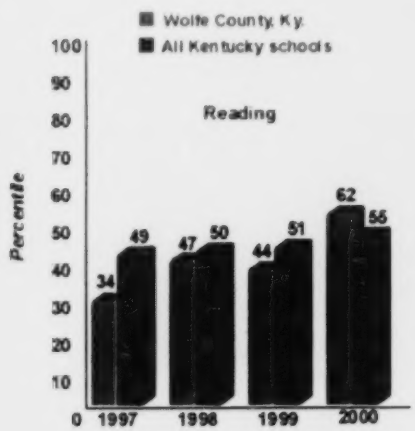
American Education's Newspaper of Record

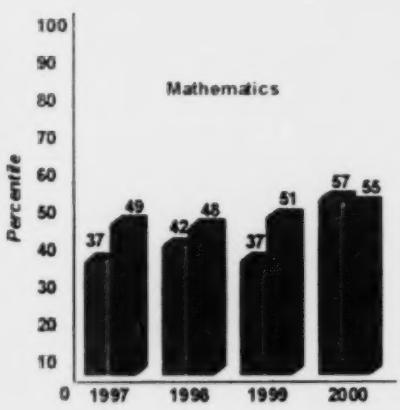
December 13, 2000

Achievement on the Rise

Education Week

Despite the persistence of poverty in eastern Kentucky, 3rd graders in the Wolfe County district have shown improvement on the California Test of Basic Skills since the legislature pumped millions of dollars into the state's schools.





SOURCE: Kentucky Department of Education.

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Education Week

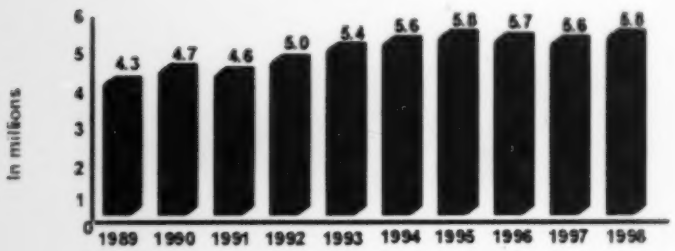
American Education's Newspaper of Record

December 13, 2000

Children in Working-Poor Families: 1989-98

Education Week

Since 1989, the number of children in the United States living in families that are defined as "working poor" has increased substantially.



NOTE: Working-poor families are defined as families in which at least one parent worked 50 or moer weeks per year, but family income was below the poverty level.

SOURCE: Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count Data Book 2000* , analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, March Current Population Survey, various years.

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